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FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2318

INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1101

RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 001881

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/CM AND EAP/EP TWANG

STATE FOR G/AIAG JLANGE, HFOSTER, RFENDRICK

STATE FOR M/MED AND M/MEDEX PETER WOOD

STATE FOR INR/EAP

HHS FOR OGHA - STEIGER, BHAT

BANGKOK FOR RMO, CDC

STATE PLEASE PASS TO USDA FOR DU/US LAMBERT

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2032

TAGS: [ECON](#) [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [AMED](#) [KFLU](#) [HK](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: HONG KONG UNIVERSITY'S GUAN YI ON RECENT TRENDS IN AVIAN FLU

Classified By: E/P Chief Laurent Charbonnet. Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: AmConGen Economic Officer and Regional Medical Officer met with Guan Yi, Director of the State Key Laboratory of Emerging Infectious Diseases at Hong Kong University (HKU), and Gavin Smith, Assistant Professor of Microbiology at HKU, to discuss general trends in avian influenza in 2007. Guan criticized current international response toward H5N1 and other strains of the virus, noting that many governments and even infectious disease experts have either become complacent or have allowed their priorities to be clouded by politics. He expressed concern that little data on the disease exists for many parts of Asia, including Northern China, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Burma. He discussed his November 2006 article in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (PNAS), noting that it caused a backlash from PRC officials and others in the international health community who questioned his findings. Guan stated that there is no chance to eradicate the virus and predicted it will remain a threat for at least another 5-10 years. He also expressed concern over the H2 virus, noting that human-to-human transmission of H2 is possible, but that no one is investigating it. He worries that H2 or a not-yet identified virus could actually cause a pandemic as H5N1 draws our attention away from other infectious diseases.
END SUMMARY.

AI Preparedness Plans

¶2. (SBU) Guan Yi said he was pessimistic about the international response toward H5N1 and other strains of the avian influenza virus. He said governments and international bodies have vastly different priorities, which are often clouded by politics. He noted pandemic preparedness is important, but worried that the lack of an outbreak thus far has already caused some countries and experts to become complacent. He noted that presenters at a recent AI conference in Toronto were "too self-congratulatory on our success" in avoiding a human outbreak. He said that the chance of eradicating the virus is "nil" and that little is actually known about the virus, its ability to be transmitted or its ability to regenerate and adapt. It remains unclear

whether the anti-virals that have been stockpiled around the world will be effective because governments have yet to test their effectiveness. Guan expressed a willingness to start this research if funding were available.

¶3. (C) Guan believes that most pandemic preparations are adequate, but might not be able to respond to a quickly-spreading virus. He noted that there already are long delays in identifying strains of the virus and in developing and then producing effective vaccines. This delay could be particularly problematic for countries and societies that lack medicine or vaccine production facilities, including Hong Kong. He rated the U.S. as having good preparation plans and global response capabilities, but fears the sustainability of those plans as the USG could focus its attention elsewhere.

International Collaboration

¶4. (SBU) Guan stated that he and others have collected fairly good data on Southern China, which allows academic researchers to gain a better understanding of the disease and isolation rates in that region. However, transparency in mainland China is still lacking. He expressed specific concern that we have no information on disease rates for Northern China. Smith added that the lack of data on disease trends in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Burma is also troubling. He emphasized that these countries do not have basic surveillance capabilities or the knowledge base to monitor the disease and investigate outbreaks. The lack of transparency, effective communication, and surveillance capabilities in many parts of Asia has the potential to complicate regional response efforts.

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PNAS Article and Isolation Rates

¶5. (SBU) Guan said his November 2006 PNAS article caused him and his collaborators problems with Chinese authorities. Three ministries in China immediately contested the findings. The WHO responded to China's protests by sending an independent expert group to check his research. The WHO's reaction angered Guan because, he claimed, the WHO appeared to cave to Chinese political posturing and did not trust his peer-reviewed scientific research. As a follow-up to the PNAS article, EconOff asked if Guan had any updated information on current isolation rates. Guan responded that they varied from province to province, but have generally remained the same with no significant changes over the past 12 months. He said &we cannot say the virus is effectively contained and we cannot say that there will be an outbreak tomorrow.⁸ However, given the political problems the article caused, he does not have plans to publish or share the data unless he uncovers new trends or abnormalities. If so, he will report it directly to the WHO.

Views of Hong Kong Government Response

¶6. (C) Guan also expressed concern over the Hong Kong government's (HKG) reaction to his research. Guan accused HKG officials of being afraid of upsetting China. He believes that political concerns over China's potential reaction to published data on the prevalence of the virus in the PRC is causing the HKG to make decisions that are not based in science. He claimed that the HKG has placed restrictions on discussing the extent of the disease, although he declined to describe those restrictions. He said the HKG does not provide adequate funding to Hong Kong institutions to study the disease; 90% of his research

funds, for example, come from abroad. Smith agreed with Guan that the HKG is overly concerned about embarrassing China.

Future Issues

¶7. (SBU) Guan discussed new research. They recently discovered different subtypes of low-pathogenic strains of the virus within a single sample of 100 birds, proving that multiple subtypes can exist within one animal population. He stated this increased the chances for the virus to adapt and regenerate.

¶8. (SBU) Guan concluded the meeting by predicting that the H5N1 virus will last another five to ten years. However, he expressed concern that the world's attention is too focused on H5N1 and, therefore, no one is investigating H2, which can be transmitted by humans. He said that if the world remains solely focused on the H5N1 strain, we might miss warning signals about H2 or another unknown virus that could develop into an epidemic.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: We are not in a position to judge Guan's claims that the HKG is resistant to new information about the prevalence of H5N1 in China out of concern for PRC central government sensitivities, nor can we assess his claims against the WHO. But, this well-regarded researcher clearly feels that some governments and researchers do not take this threat as seriously as they should and that political considerations are having an impact on research, funding (including for his projects), and overall government policies regarding emerging infectious diseases. END COMMENT.

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